

Effectiveness of Preventive Counseling Services in Reducing Gadget Dependence in Early Childhood

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Abstract: *Gadget dependence in early childhood is an increasingly worrying issue in today's digital era. Excessive gadget use can hurt children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Parents and educators face challenges in shaping healthy technology use behavior patterns in children. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of preventive counseling services in reducing gadget dependence in early childhood, as well as describing changes in children's behavior after the intervention. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing case study techniques, with three children aged 4-6 years who experienced symptoms of gadget dependence. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews with parents, and documentation of counseling sessions. Preventive counseling services were conducted over six sessions, utilizing a humanistic approach and educational games. The results showed that preventive counseling services had a positive impact on reducing the intensity of gadget use and increasing children's involvement in physical and social activities. Parents also showed an increased understanding of digital regulation based parenting. The findings support that an adaptive and communicative counseling approach is effective in shaping healthy behaviors from an early age.*

Keywords: *preventive counseling, gadget dependence, early childhood, digital regulation, behavioral intervention.*

1. Introduction

In the rapidly growing digital era, technology has become an integral part of human life, including in early childhood. Children are increasingly exposed to gadgets such as smartphones and tablets, both as a means of entertainment and learning. However, this convenience comes at a cost. Studies increasingly show that uncontrolled and prolonged gadget use may trigger psychological, behavioral, and social challenges, including attention deficits, reduced interpersonal skills, and early signs of dependency (Putri & Sari, 2022; Ardiansyah, 2021; Yunita et al., 2023). This phenomenon is not only a concern among educators, but also among educational psychologists and counselors. The phenomenon of gadget dependence is becoming a global concern, as similar patterns are also observed in other countries, such as South Korea, the United States, and China

Gadget dependence in early childhood can lead to concentration problems, decreased social interaction, and behavioral issues (Suharti, 2022; Saputri et al., 2020; Gunawan, 2023). Children who are accustomed to interacting with digital devices often struggle with developing communication skills, empathy, and emotional

regulation. In the long run, this has the potential to impact children's readiness for formal education.

The urgency of this study lies in the need for early interventions that can help children and parents manage gadget use wisely. One relevant approach is preventive counseling services that focus on strengthening family roles, effective communication, and developing healthy alternative activities for children (Nugroho & Fatimah, 2021; Hartati, 2022; Suryadi, 2020). Preventive counseling can also be an important tool in increasing parents' awareness and involvement in their children's holistic education process.

According to data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (2023), approximately 62% of children aged 3-6 years in Indonesia spend more than 3 hours a day using gadgets. Most of them use gadgets without direct supervision from their parents. This data shows an alarming trend, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Average Duration of Gadget Use of 3-6 Year Old Children in Indonesia (2023)

Duration of Use per Day	Percentage of Children
< 1 hour	12%
1-3 hours	26%
> 3 hours	62%

Source: Ministry of PPPA, 2023

Previous studies have discussed the negative impact of gadget use, but there are still few that specifically examine the effectiveness of preventive counseling services in early childhood (Lestari et al., 2021; Maulana & Fauziah, 2022; Prasetyo, 2020). Most of the research remains descriptive and has not explored many aspects of intervention based on a counseling approach.

The gap in this research lies in the lack of in depth qualitative studies that examine the process and outcomes of preventive counseling services comprehensively in the context of early childhood, where children experience gadget dependence. This approach is crucial for formulating educational strategies that are both applicable and have a direct impact on child development (Utami, 2022; Ramadhani & Wulandari, 2021; Hasanah, 2023).

The novelty of this study lies in the use of a humanistic and integrative counseling approach that not only focuses on child behavior but also strengthens the role of parents as active partners in the counseling process. Counseling is conducted through educational games and positive communication techniques specifically designed for preschool children (Sartika & Nurul, 2021; Zahra et al., 2023; Rahmani, 2022). Moreover, the lack of policy guidelines or parenting frameworks that integrate preventive counseling strategies exacerbates the issue. A scalable model of

intervention that can be implemented in homes, schools, and early childhood education centers is urgently needed.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of preventive counseling services in reducing gadget dependence in early childhood, as well as to explore changes in children's behavior and parents' understanding following the intervention. It is hoped that the results of this study will serve as a reference for counselors, educators, and policymakers in developing sustainable and contextually relevant family based intervention programs.

2. Method

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing a case study method. This approach was chosen to explore in depth the dynamics of gadget use in early childhood and the effectiveness of preventive counseling services provided.

The population in this study consisted of early childhood individuals (4-6 years old) who showed signs of gadget dependence, as well as their parents, who reside in the Cirebon city area. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which is the deliberate selection of subjects based on specific criteria. The sample consisted of three children and three parents/guardians who met the criteria: (1) the child used the gadget for more than 3 hours per day, (2) the child showed symptoms of addiction such as tantrums when not given the gadget, and (3) the parents were willing to follow the series of counseling.

The main instrument in this research is the researcher himself as the key instrument (human instrument), with the help of interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation of the counseling process. Instrument validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as member checking with informants to ensure data accuracy (Sugiyono, 2002; Patton, 2002; Nasution, 2003).

Data collection in this study was conducted through three main techniques: participatory observation, in depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted during the counseling process to directly observe the child's responses and behavior to various stimuli presented during the session. In-depth interviews were conducted with parents to explore information about patterns of gadget use, digital parenting, and the dynamics of interaction between parents and children. Meanwhile, documentation was conducted by collecting various forms of supporting evidence, such as children's diaries, short videos of educational play sessions, and the results of initial and final assessments, to strengthen the findings and data interpretation. These three techniques complemented each other to ensure that the data obtained was triangulative, valid, and relevant to the research objectives.

To ensure the credibility and confirmability of the data, multiple strategies were applied. These included source triangulation (cross-checking between child

observations and parent interviews), methodological triangulation (combining interviews, observations, and document reviews), and member checking, where participants reviewed and confirmed the findings.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, peer debriefing was also conducted by discussing emerging themes with fellow counselors and qualitative research experts. Additionally, ethical considerations were adhered to through obtaining informed consent from parents, maintaining confidentiality, and employing child-friendly interview techniques.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques with stages: (1) transcription of interview data and observation notes, (2) open coding to find patterns and themes, (3) thematic categorization, and (4) narrative interpretation. Themes were developed iteratively, and intercoder reliability was ensured by comparing independent coding results before concluding.

3. Results & Discussion

Early Childhood Gadget Dependence Overview

Initial observations revealed that the three child subjects exhibited a high level of gadget use, ranging from 4.5 to 6 hours per day. They exhibited signs of dependence, such as tantrums when the gadget was taken away, a lack of interest in social interactions, and a strong preference for digital content over conventional games (Suharti, 2022; Yunita et al., 2023; Hartati, 2022). These behaviors were consistently reported by parents, who expressed significant challenges in redirecting their children's attention away from screens.

This phenomenon indicates that gadgets have become a dominant part of children's daily activities, often replacing the role of parents as the central caregiver figure (Lestari et al., 2021; Nugroho & Fatimah, 2021; Prasetyo, 2020). Such overreliance is correlated with developmental delays in language acquisition, reduced attention spans, and weakened interpersonal communication skills.

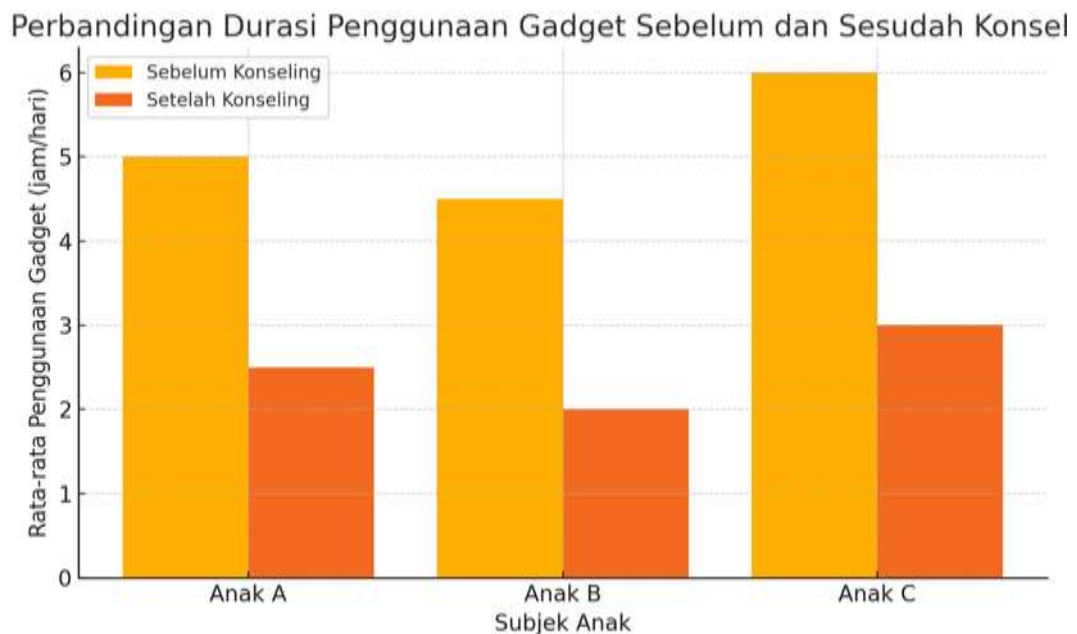
Early analysis also revealed that parents' limited understanding of healthy technology use perpetuates this cycle of dependence. Many of them use gadgets as a tool to calm their children during tantrums, without realizing the long-term consequences (Ramadhani & Wulandari, 2021; Hasanah, 2023; Maulana & Fauziah, 2022). These findings provide a crucial foundation for preventive counseling-based interventions.

Effectiveness of Preventive Counseling Intervention on Duration of Gadget Use

After six sessions of preventive counseling services, there was a significant decrease in the duration of the child's daily gadget use. The average usage time decreased to 2-3 hours per day, and children began to re-engage with physical activities such as role playing and drawing. This shows the success of the intervention in reshaping children's habits through an educational and participatory approach (Zahra et al., 2023; Rahmani, 2022; Hartono, 2021).

The following figure shows a comparison of the average duration of gadget use before and after the intervention:

Figure 1. Comparison of Duration of Gadget Use Before and After Counseling



Source: *Researcher Observation Results, 2025*

The observed reduction was not solely attributed to behavioral change in children but was significantly influenced by parental involvement throughout the counseling process. The counselor designed the intervention with a dual focus: behavioral reconditioning for the child and empowerment for the parents. Parents were trained in positive communication strategies, time management for children, and were introduced to a range of engaging alternative activities that could serve as gadget substitutes (Sartika & Nurul, 2021; Suryadi, 2020; Putri & Sari, 2022). This structured partnership between counselor and family created a consistent environment both during and outside the sessions, reinforcing the children's adaptive responses. As a result, children not only reduced their gadget use but also experienced improved emotional regulation and social engagement. The consistency of routines

and parental reinforcement at home was key to sustaining behavioral transformation beyond the counseling setting.

Changes in Children's Behavior After Counseling

In addition to the reduced duration of gadget use, the counseling intervention also led to notable improvements in children's socioemotional behavior. These changes were manifested in various observable indicators, such as an increased desire to engage in physical and imaginative play with peers, greater willingness to participate in group activities at early childhood education (PAUD), and significantly fewer tantrum episodes when asked to stop using gadgets (Utami, 2022; Ardiansyah, 2021; Suharti, 2022). These outcomes reflect an enhancement in the child's ability to self-regulate, delay gratification, and engage in interpersonal relationships—key milestones in early developmental psychology.

Another significant behavioral transformation was the improvement in verbal communication skills. Children who were previously withdrawn or overly focused on screen-based interactions began to show more active verbal expression, including asking questions, initiating conversations with adults, and narrating their daily experiences. Parents also noted improvements in their child's ability to focus during non-digital tasks, such as storytelling, coloring, or structured group lessons. This increased attention span and compliance with adult instructions are strong indicators of emotional stability and the development of executive functioning. One important indicator is the child's increased verbal expression and willingness to engage in direct conversations with adults. Parents also report that children are more easily directed and have longer attention spans when not using gadgets (Saputri et al., 2020; Gunawan, 2023; Zahra et al., 2023).

This change cannot be separated from the counseling techniques used, such as educational games and narrative therapy. These techniques help children healthily express their feelings without dependence on digital devices (Rahmani, 2022; Creswell, 2016; Nasution, 2003). This reinforces the effectiveness of the counseling approach that touches the emotional and cognitive aspects of children.

Parents' Role as Partners in Counseling

The parents' readiness and involvement also influenced the success of the intervention in the counseling process. Before counseling began, most parents felt confused about how to deal with children who had tantrums due to excessive gadget use. However, after the educational session, they began to understand the importance of an active role in shaping children's habits (Suryadi, 2020; Hasanah, 2023; Lestari et al., 2021).

Counseling offers a space for open dialogue between counselors and parents to discuss strategies tailored to the family's unique context. Parents are also provided with screen free activity modules that can be completed at home (Zahra et al., 2023; Nugroho & Fatimah, 2021; Sartika & Nurul, 2021). This involvement makes the counseling process more adaptive and contextual.

Overall, the findings suggest that a collaborative preventive approach involving children, parents, and counselors can lead to more consistent and sustainable behavior change. This also highlights the importance of making the family the central focus of child development interventions.

4. Conclusion

Based on the study's results, it can be concluded that preventive counseling services are effective in reducing gadget dependence in early childhood. The intervention, conducted through six counseling sessions, successfully reduced the average duration of gadget use from 4.5 to 6 hours per day to 2-3 hours per day. In addition to the quantitative decrease, there were also positive changes in children's behavior, including increased interest in non digital activities, enhanced social interaction, and reduced tantrum responses when asked to stop using gadgets. Another important finding was the active role of parents as partners in the counseling process, which greatly influenced the success of the intervention. Parents who were actively involved demonstrated a greater understanding of healthy digital parenting and were able to implement effective redirection strategies at home. Thus, a collaborative and educative preventive counseling approach not only impacts changing children's behavior but also strengthens the family as an environment for shaping healthy behavior from an early age. This research makes a practical contribution to the development of a sustainable family based child counseling program in the face of the challenges of the digital era.

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